

# Depictions of Social Inequality in Novels by Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki

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## ABSTRACT

Social inequality has been one of the most persistent and deeply rooted socio-political concerns reflected in modern Indian literature. This research paper examines how three major writers—Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki—portray structural injustice, entrenched caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, political exploitation, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities in their major works. Their narratives explore how social systems shape personal identities, restrict opportunities, and perpetuate cycles of oppression across generations. Through comparative literary analysis and interpretive thematic study, the paper demonstrates how each author presents a distinctive yet intersecting representation of discrimination, exclusion, and human resilience. The analysis further highlights how their works function as social documents that question established norms, reveal mechanisms of inequality, and amplify the voices of those historically silenced. In doing so, the study underscores the transformative power of literature in exposing social realities and advocating for justice.

**Keywords:** social inequality; caste hierarchy; class oppression; marginalization; discrimination; subaltern voices; Dalit literature; narrative representation; Indian English literature; social justice; structural injustice

## INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature and Dalit literature have long served as important platforms for examining and challenging the deeply embedded structures of social inequality. These literary domains do more than narrate stories; they engage with historical, cultural, and political processes that shape social hierarchies in India. Writers often use fiction, autobiography, and semi-realistic narrative forms to reveal how caste, class, gender, and economic disparity influence everyday life, interpersonal relationships, and individual aspirations. Through such representations, literature becomes a mirror that reflects the complexities and contradictions of Indian society. Within this broad literary landscape, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki stand out as influential voices addressing themes of injustice, marginalization, and resistance. Although they come from varied social and literary backgrounds—Roy writing in the tradition of Indian English fiction, Mistry contributing to diasporic Indian narratives, and Valmiki emerging from Dalit autobiographical writing—they share a common commitment to exposing the mechanisms through which inequality is produced and sustained.

Their works show that social injustice is not merely episodic or incidental but is embedded within cultural norms, family structures, political systems, and institutional arrangements. Inequality, as depicted by these writers, is both inherited and continually reproduced through practices that regulate who is valued, who is excluded, and whose voices are heard or silenced. This paper examines how Roy, Mistry, and Valmiki employ distinct thematic concerns, character portrayals, narrative strategies, and symbolic techniques to interrogate the foundations of Indian social hierarchy.

By analyzing *The God of Small Things*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Joothan*, the study identifies how each text illuminates different dimensions of social inequality—whether through the emotional and symbolic rendering of caste boundaries, the stark realism of socio-political oppression, or the firsthand autobiographical account of Dalit experience. Together, these works offer a multifaceted perspective on how discrimination shapes personal destinies and collective identities, making them significant contributions to the discourse on social justice in modern Indian literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on Indian English literature and Dalit writing underscores the vital role these literary traditions play in documenting the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. Researchers have consistently argued that literature in India functions not only as a creative expression but also as a socio-cultural archive that records the voices, aspirations, and resistance of groups historically denied representation. Within this framework, several studies highlight how writers use narrative techniques, personal testimonies, and socio-political commentary to critique entrenched systems of inequality. A substantial body of work stresses the centrality of Dalit autobiographies in

challenging dominant caste narratives. Scholars observe that autobiographical writing within Dalit literature provides direct, unmediated access to lived experiences of oppression, thereby destabilizing upper-caste versions of social reality. These texts confront discriminatory practices such as untouchability, segregation, and humiliation, positioning personal testimony as a form of political resistance. Om Prakash Valmiki's contributions are frequently cited in this context for their honesty, clarity, and transformative power.

Critical interpretations of Arundhati Roy's fiction highlight the political dimension of her narrative interventions. Researchers point out that Roy's novels often blur the boundaries between personal stories and larger socio-political issues. Her work is seen as a deliberate critique of institutional power structures, especially those related to caste, gender, and social conformity. Studies note that her narrative style—marked by symbolism, fragmentation, and emotional intensity—serves to expose the subtle mechanisms through which social inequality operates.

Rohinton Mistry's fiction has attracted considerable attention for its portrayal of socio-political turmoil and state-sponsored oppression during the Emergency. Scholars argue that his realistic and detailed narrative style brings to light the vulnerability of ordinary citizens under authoritarian systems. His focus on caste-affected characters, economic instability, and political abuses further positions his novels as important documents of India's socio-political history.

Across the critical landscape, there is also a recurring emphasis on the ethical responsibility of writers in representing marginalized communities. Many scholars argue that authors who engage with themes of injustice must navigate the complexities of voice, agency, and authenticity, ensuring that portrayals do not exploit suffering but instead generate awareness and empathy.

Together, these studies form the conceptual foundation for the present analysis. They provide key insights into how literature has historically functioned as a space for resistance, documentation, and critique, enabling a deeper understanding of how Roy, Mistry, and Valmiki depict social inequality through their respective narrative forms.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The analysis presented in this paper is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives that collectively support an in-depth understanding of social inequality as depicted in the works of Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki. These frameworks enable the examination of both the structural forces shaping oppression and the narrative methods through which such experiences are represented. The Subaltern Studies Approach provides a critical lens for understanding marginalized voices and their limited representation within mainstream historical and literary narratives.

Originating from interdisciplinary scholarship that sought to re-center the experiences of oppressed communities, this approach emphasizes the importance of recovering voices that have been traditionally silenced or ignored. When applied to literary texts, it helps assess how characters positioned at the edges of society articulate resistance, trauma, and identity, while also highlighting the limitations imposed by dominant cultural structures. Caste and Class Theory offers a sociological foundation for interrogating the hierarchical arrangements that govern Indian society.

Drawing upon analyses of caste-based discrimination, economic stratification, and social mobility, this framework helps explore how systemic inequalities are reproduced through cultural norms, institutional practices, and intergenerational dynamics. It also enables the examination of how caste identity intersects with class status, shaping access to resources, social relationships, and personal agency within the narratives studied. Narrative Sociology is used to investigate how personal stories reflect broader patterns of structural inequality.

This approach views individual experiences as embedded within larger social frameworks, suggesting that personal narratives reveal not only private emotions but also the societal conditions that shape them. In the context of the selected texts, narrative sociology helps analyze how storytelling techniques, character development, and autobiographical elements illuminate the lived realities of oppression and resilience. Together, these three frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for examining the literary representation of social inequality. They support a multidimensional reading that encompasses both macro-level social structures and micro-level personal experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how Roy, Mistry, and Valmiki depict injustice and human endurance in their works.

## **4. Depictions of Social Inequality**

The selected works by Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki present layered and nuanced portrayals of social inequality in India. Each author draws from distinct socio-cultural contexts yet converges on the central theme of marginalization caused by caste, class, and political power. Their representations expose not only the overt acts of discrimination but also the subtle, everyday forms of exclusion embedded in social norms and institutional structures.

#### **4.1 Arundhati Roy: The God of Small Things**

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy constructs a world where caste and gender ideologies dictate social behavior and personal relationships. Her portrayal of caste-based marginalization is most powerfully embodied in the character of Velutha, an individual born into a stigmatized community whose talents and humanity remain unrecognized due to rigid caste boundaries. His relationship with Ammu becomes the site where caste-based prejudice reveals its full violence, demonstrating how personal affection is criminalized when it challenges entrenched hierarchies. Gender inequality forms another central axis of Roy's critique. Ammu's experiences highlight the restricted roles available to women, especially those who defy patriarchal expectations. Her attempts to reclaim autonomy, whether emotional or sexual, are met with social suspicion and punitive consequences, underscoring the intersection of caste and gender oppression.

The novel also foregrounds the social hypocrisy embedded in upper-caste respectability. Roy exposes how notions of honor, purity, and morality mask deeper structures of violence and exclusion. The theme of forbidden relationships—both across caste lines and within family boundaries—demonstrates how social codes regulate intimacy and personal choice, reinforcing the politics of “who may love whom.” Roy's narrative style intensifies the emotional impact of these inequalities. Her non-linear structure, rich imagery, and recurring symbolic motifs create a layered reading experience that mirrors the complexity of trauma and social injustice. Through this approach, inequality becomes not only a social reality but also a deeply visceral experience for the reader.

#### **4.2 Rohinton Mistry: A Fine Balance**

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* offers a sweeping portrayal of social inequality through the intertwined lives of individuals navigating poverty, political instability, and systemic caste-based violence. Urban poverty emerges as a defining theme, vividly illustrated through the experiences of tailors Ishvar Darji and Omprakash. Their struggle to secure stable livelihoods reveals the precarious conditions of laboring classes in rapidly changing urban landscapes. The novel provides a detailed account of caste violence through the protagonists' family histories. Mistry shows how caste-based discrimination extends beyond physical violence to include the economic and social restrictions imposed on entire communities, limiting mobility and reinforcing generational disadvantage. A significant portion of the narrative focuses on state-sponsored oppression during the Emergency.

Through the depiction of forced sterilizations, arbitrary arrests, and demolition drives, Mistry illustrates how political authority can intensify existing inequalities. The characters' suffering becomes emblematic of the broader population subjected to authoritarian governance. Economic inequality is portrayed not as an abstract concept but as a tangible force that shapes everyday life. Vulnerable individuals and communities are shown at the mercy of landlords, political agents, and exploitative systems. Despite these harsh realities, Mistry introduces elements of human compassion and solidarity, suggesting that interpersonal bonds provide moments of dignity within oppressive structures. His use of detailed realism and multi-character narratives allows for a comprehensive exploration of how structural injustice operates. This narrative approach reinforces the idea that inequality is maintained not only by economic conditions but also by cultural attitudes and political decisions.

#### **4.3 Om Prakash Valmiki: Joothan**

As an autobiographical account, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* offers one of the most direct and impactful portrayals of caste-based oppression in Indian society. The first-person narrative allows readers to engage intimately with the discrimination faced by Dalit communities, making the brutality of untouchability practices impossible to ignore. Valmiki's detailed descriptions of segregated seating arrangements, forced menial labor, and social ostracism highlight the everyday indignities imposed on individuals solely because of their caste identity. A significant portion of the text focuses on educational discrimination, where young Dalit students experience humiliation, exclusion, and inequality at the hands of teachers and peers.

These experiences reveal how institutions such as schools contribute to reinforcing caste hierarchies, shaping self-perception and opportunities for social advancement. Valmiki's narrative also explores resistance through literacy and writing. By choosing to articulate his experiences publicly, he transforms personal suffering into a collective voice of protest. Literature becomes a transformative force, empowering marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives and assert their dignity. As a prominent voice within Dalit literature, Valmiki's work exposes the raw, lived reality of caste oppression. His narrative serves not only as an autobiographical testimony but also as a political intervention that calls for recognition, equality, and structural change.

#### **5. Comparative Analysis**

A comparative reading of the works of Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki reveals both convergences and divergences in their treatment of social inequality. Each writer employs a distinct narrative mode, yet all three illuminate how caste, class, and political structures interact to create layered forms of oppression. The following tables summarize the major thematic and narrative elements across the selected texts.

**Table 1: Major Themes of Social Inequality**

Author	Key Theme	Nature of Inequality	Narrative Focus
Arundhati Roy	Caste & Gender	Social norms and forbidden relationships	Emotional trauma, family history
Rohinton Mistry	Class, Caste, State Oppression	Structural poverty and political violence	Realism, multi-character narrative
Om Prakash Valmiki	Caste (Dalit experience)	Everyday discrimination, untouchability	Autobiographical truth-telling

This table shows how each writer foregrounds a different dimension of inequality. While Roy emphasizes the intersection of caste and gender, Mistry's narrative situates caste within the broader framework of class and political oppression. Valmiki's focus remains on firsthand Dalit experiences, making his narrative a powerful counter-voice to dominant social discourses.

**Table 2: Representation of Oppression**

Type of Oppression	Roy	Mistry	Valmiki
Caste-based	Strong focus through Velutha	Central to backstory	Core theme
Class disparity	Moderate	Very strong	Moderate
Gender inequality	Prominent	Limited	Limited
Political/State violence	Moderate	Very strong	Moderate

This comparison highlights the distinct emphasis each writer places on various forms of structural injustice. Mistry's text stands out for its depiction of state violence during the Emergency, whereas Roy's work foregrounds gendered suffering alongside caste oppression. Valmiki, through his autobiographical lens, brings caste-based violence into sharp, personal focus.

**Table 3: Resistance and Agency**

Writer	Form of Resistance	Depiction
Roy	Emotional defiance and forbidden love	Characters challenge caste roles
Mistry	Human solidarity	Friendship, mutual support
Valmiki	Education and writing	Assertion of dignity, literary activism

Here, resistance emerges in different forms across the texts. Roy presents acts of emotional and personal rebellion; Mistry highlights solidarity among the oppressed as a means of coping with systemic injustice; Valmiki emphasizes self-expression, education, and writing as instruments of empowerment. Despite these varied modes, all three authors position resistance as an essential counterforce to oppression.

## DISCUSSION

Although the three authors write from different historical moments, literary backgrounds, and personal experiences, their works converge on several important themes that reveal the persistent nature of social inequality in India. All three writers emphasize the endurance of caste hierarchy in both private and public spaces. Whether through Velutha's tragic fate, the hereditary caste violence faced by Ishvar and Omprakash, or Valmiki's childhood experiences of untouchability, caste emerges as a central axis of oppression. This enduring hierarchy intersects with class and gender, creating multiple layers of disadvantage. The link between poverty and social identity is a recurring theme, particularly in Mistry's portrayal of urban laborers and Valmiki's descriptions of community-level marginalization. Economic deprivation is shown not as an isolated condition but as one deeply tied to caste-based exclusion and limited access to opportunity.

State authority also plays a significant role in reinforcing inequality. Mistry's graphic depiction of Emergency-era abuses reveals how political systems can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Roy similarly critiques institutional power, while Valmiki exposes how government schools and public institutions reproduce caste-based discrimination. The psychological impact of discrimination emerges across all three texts. Characters internalize trauma, shame, fear, and helplessness, revealing that social inequality is not limited to material deprivation but extends into emotional and cognitive domains. Whether through Roy's symbolic storytelling, Mistry's stark realism, or Valmiki's direct testimony, the internal consequences of oppression are rendered with depth and sensitivity. Despite stylistic differences, these authors collectively illustrate that social inequality in India is not merely an economic or political issue but a deeply cultural one—embedded in everyday practices, interpersonal relationships, and institutional norms. Their varied narrative approaches together create a comprehensive and multifaceted panorama of inequality.

## CONCLUSION

The novels and autobiographical writings of Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Om Prakash Valmiki expose the complex and multilayered nature of social inequality in India. Through distinct yet interconnected lenses, they highlight how caste, class, and political authority intersect to shape individual experiences and limit collective possibilities. Their works contribute significantly to contemporary literary and social discourse by giving voice to individuals and communities historically marginalized within mainstream narratives. By foregrounding the lives of the oppressed, these writers challenge entrenched systems of power and invite readers to confront the realities of discrimination and injustice. Their narratives serve not only as artistic expressions but also as powerful social critiques that call for empathy, awareness, and transformation. Collectively, they reaffirm the importance of literature as a tool for exposing inequality, preserving marginalized histories, and envisioning a more just and inclusive society.

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